

# **Legacy: Remember Your Vision**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Matthew 22:35-40, 28:16-20**

*A great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission makes a great church.*

A sermon preached by  
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Well I remember my first Sunday as the pastor of a church. I had a bachelor's degree from Hendrix College and one year of seminary under my belt. I was 23 years old, engaged to be married in two weeks, and fairly clueless. I had moved into the parsonage, and the little white Oppelo United Methodist Church was across the road. I had met a few of the church members, and I had asked them how they produced their bulletins for Sunday. They said they hadn't had bulletins in several months, because the mimeograph machine was broken. For those of you who have never known anything but copiers, a mimeograph is a printing machine. You cut letters in a stencil with a typewriter, which is then wrapped around a drum, and thick black or blue ink is pressed through the holes onto the paper when you turn the crank. More modern versions were electric, but the Oppelo machine wasn't.

My first pastoral duty was to spend Saturday afternoon taking the mimeograph machine apart, cleaning it, putting it back together, and printing a bulletin for my first service as pastor. I had not taken mimeograph repair at either Hendrix or Duke.

My first sermon was one I have preached at every church. The early versions were called, "Why I am a minister," and it was basically my call story and personal testimony. After a year at Oppelo and the largest church in Houston—Arkansas—I returned to Duke and finished seminary. Then I repeated that sermon in ever-evolving forms at Watson, Lake Village, Montrose, Bryant, Hot Springs First, and Fort Smith First United Methodist Churches. Also thrown in there were three years as a District Superintendent, serving nearly 300 churches in two districts across the northern half of Arkansas. Time and your patience will not allow me to reminisce about all the wonderful people and events that have happened in 44 years of ministry.

Maybe you're expecting me to say I have no regrets as I end this appointment and enter a retired relationship with the conference. That seems to be a popular thing to say: "No

regrets.” But that is neither honest nor true. There are many things I wish I could have done differently or better. There have been lots of mistakes and “learning experiences” over four decades. Some of the things I regret I didn’t even have control over.

I ran across a quote by Brene Brown, an expert on vulnerability and leadership, who said, “‘No regrets’ has become synonymous with daring and adventure, but I disagree. The idea of ‘no regrets’ doesn’t mean living with courage; it means living without reflection. To live without regret is to believe we have nothing to learn, no amends to make, and no opportunity to be braver with our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, I am approaching the end of my active ministry like the scene near the end of the movie *Schindler’s List*. Oskar Schindler was a hero of the Nazi Holocaust in World War II. He was a German industrialist and member of the Nazi party, yet through his efforts, 1,200 Jews were saved from extermination in the concentration camps. He employed them in his factories, bribed the Nazis, and they were spared. In the movie, Schindler is given a gift by his grateful Jewish employees at the end of the war. It is a gold ring inscribed with a Hebrew saying, “He who saves one life saves the entire world.” Instead of reacting with joy, Schindler is overcome with emotion and collapses on his car, crying out, “I could have done more! I could have saved more!”<sup>2</sup> I get it; I wish I could have done more and better.

But it’s not about me. I did the best I could with the time, resources, and energy I had. But the ministry of Christ, the movement of the people of God, is not about any person. The only person that ultimately matters is Jesus Christ. The Church belongs to him, and his ministry is founded on a vision of the Kingdom of God.

The vision of ministry is not unlike the vision that founded our country. America is nobody’s kingdom; America is an idea. In 1776, Thomas Paine, the American patriot, wrote a pamphlet called “Common Sense,” that convinced the colonists to throw off British rule and start a new nation. He wrote, “[W]here, say some, is the King of America? [I]n America the law is king. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king; and there ought to be no other.”<sup>3</sup> Obviously, that statement has implications beyond the walls of this church, as there are forces at work today that would undermine the ideal of democracy. But let’s focus.

America is a vision of law and democracy that has been imperfectly implemented for 250 years. The Church is a vision of the Kingdom of God that has been imperfectly implemented for 2,000 years. But still we have this picture of what it ought to be, and that’s what we try to achieve. The vision is not about the personality in the pulpit; it’s the work of the people in the pews.

Gary Newton was showing me last week a bulletin from our church that he had recovered from somebody’s closet. The date was June 14, 1959, almost exactly 65 years ago. In that era, First Methodist Church of Fort Smith was the largest Methodist church in the state. There were about 1100 people every Sunday in Sunday School and church. Those were the glory days. But the most interesting part of that bulletin to me is something I have shared with you before. Every week there was a report of the personal contacts that people had made to invite people to church and to check on those who had been absent. That week there had been 172 personal visits, 301 phone calls, and 619 letters and cards—1,092 contacts—made not by the preacher, but by the people of the church. Much has changed in 65 years, but the power of personal contact has not. Dr. Fred Roebuck, the pastor in the Golden Age, wrote in that bulletin, “Every member of the church should

endeavor to attend Sunday School and one or more preaching services. The eleven o'clock service is sorely in need of 100 more people who will come and sit near the front of the sanctuary." Some things never change!

It is time for First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith to renew your commitment to the vision and mission of this church and to develop a ministry plan for the next few years. The pandemic is over; the denominational divorce has been settled; it's time for a new and exciting chapter in the story of our church. A new vision, mission, and plan needs to be articulated and implemented. That's one reason I'm retiring, because the church needs new and fresh leadership to take it to a new place. This fall, the Administrative Board has contracted for a strategic planning process to involve the whole church in conversations about the future. You will have new pastors to lead you. If you do it right, it will be so big that it will take a few years to live into it. I'm very excited for you, and so is your new senior pastor.

But before you jump off into a new chapter, I want to share an old vision with you that I think is still fundamental to who we are. It was articulated by Jesus himself, and we have spent 2,000 years trying to implement it. He made two statements in the Gospel of Matthew that continue to be the foundation of the ministry of the church. In Jerusalem during the last week of his life, Jesus was being questioned by the religious leaders: "*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*" Jesus reached back to quote two of the great principles from the law of Moses, "'*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*' *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*"<sup>4</sup> We call this the Great Commandment; this is the pinnacle of Christian values and ethics. It's all about love—love God, love your neighbor—all your neighbors. Treat others the way you would want to be treated. It's pretty simple, but it's not easy. Nevertheless, if we can get those two things right, the rest of life, faith, religion, and relationships pretty much falls into place.

The second pillar of the Christian movement was given by Jesus a few days later. By the end of the week after he gave the Great Commandment, Jesus was arrested, convicted, beaten, and crucified. On the third day he rose again, and he instructed the women at the empty tomb to tell the disciples he would meet them in Galilee. When they got together, Jesus gave them their marching orders for the rest of their lives. We call it the Great Commission: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"<sup>5</sup> Are those great last words or what? Boom—drop the mic, Jesus! The Great Commission is instruction for every follower of Jesus. That is the calling of every disciple. Make more disciples! Introduce people to Jesus; baptize them in his name; instruct them in his teaching; build them up in faith. And Jesus will be with us to the end of our journey.

That's the plan: love God; love your neighbor; make disciples. If we will give ourselves wholeheartedly to this mission, God will renew our church. Rick Warren was the founding pastor of Saddleback Community Church in the San Diego area in 1980. From a Bible study in his condo, the church grew to average 20,000 worshippers on the weekend in multiple locations. In 1995, Warren published his principles for "church health," as he called it, in his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*. This was his statement of purpose: "A

great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a great church.”<sup>6</sup> Rick Warren used to be Southern Baptist until they kicked him out for having a woman pastor on his staff, and I would not agree with him on every point. But I have always admired his humble leadership and his clarity of vision. For him, it’s not about being a celebrity pastor or growing a mega-church. It’s about this: love God, love your neighbor, and make disciples. Commit to that, and you will have a great church.

Is there hope for us? Many people today say the church is dying. Especially the traditional denominational type of church, with the downtown location and the aging congregation and the big building to maintain. We have been through a tough season, to be sure: a worldwide pandemic, a denominational split, a culture that does not support the church like it used to. Is there hope for Fort Smith First United Methodist Church? Let me ask you this: Is there a God in heaven? Is Jesus still our Savior? Is the Holy Spirit alive and working in the world? Has the church ever suffered a season of distress and come back stronger and more vital? Is faith still a thing? Does love still matter?

You’d better believe it! Our God is the God of Ezekiel. When Ezekiel was given the word of God, the nation of Israel was a people in exile, destitute, destroyed and scattered, like dry bones in the sand of the desert. There was no life in them. But the Spirit began to move and the bones came together. Then flesh grew on their bodies. The Spirit blew, and breath came back into their lungs. “*And they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*”<sup>7</sup> The Lord God was going to bring them through their tough season and give them new life.

We are not dry bones. We are not dead in the desert. We are a church with strength and resources and people and purpose. And challenges—we have challenges that are common to every congregation trying to be the church in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

I believe that greater days are ahead for this church. That’s why I am so excited about the strategic planning process that you will go through. The timing is perfect. You are going to learn so much and see some things in a new way. Some things are going to change, and some of those changes may not be easy. But they will be for the better, because they will come out of a shared vision, mission, and plan for ministry.

But even then, your hope is not in the plan. Your hope is in the love that ties everything together—God, neighbor, church, and community. Paul Chilcote is a Wesley scholar who wrote a book last year about the hope of The United Methodist Church. He called it *Multiplying Love: A Vision of United Methodist Life Together*. He ended the book with a great Wesley quote. Dr. Chilcote wrote, “Inclusive love, in fact nothing more and nothing less, must be the foundation of renewed Methodism. Wesley made this abundantly clear in his day, and we need to do everything possible to demonstrate Christlike love in our church and in our world today. John Wesley provides the template:

Let love not visit you as a transient guest, but be the constant ruling disposition of your soul. See that your heart is filled at all times and on all occasions with real, genuine benevolence, not only to those who love you, but to every soul. Let it pant in your heart, let it sparkle in your eyes, let it shine on all your actions. Whenever you open your lips, let it be with love, and let the law of kindness be on your tongue. Your word will then distill as the rain and as the dew upon the tender herb. Be not constrained or limited in your affection, but let it embrace every child of God.”

Chilcote closes, “Let’s pray that the spirit of Christ will refresh us all and help us multiply love in The United Methodist Church for the sake of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

As I get ready to close out my preaching career today, my heart is full of gratitude. I am grateful for my parents that raised me in the church, for the churches that nurtured me in faith as a child, for the youth group that led me into a call to ministry, for a seminary education that grounded me in a deep understanding of the Christian faith. I am grateful for each of my congregations that put up with me and loved me and taught me so much, and for The United Methodist Church that gave me a place to serve out my calling. I am most grateful for my family, staff members, and friends who have given me grace and support for a very long time.

We are a people of faith, hope, and love. I think you remember which one is the greatest. Multiply love, and there will be good times ahead. God is not finished with you or this church or me just yet. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> -Brene Brown, quoted by Chris Holmes, *Shift Happens*, July 10, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Keneally, Steven Zaillian, directed by Steven Spielberg, *Schindler's List* (Universal Pictures, Amblin Entertainment, 1994). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oskar\\_Schindler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oskar_Schindler).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Heather Cox Richardson, *Letters to an American*, April 26, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:36-40.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 37:10.

<sup>8</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, *Multiplying Love: A Vision of United Methodist Life Together* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2023), 94.